ETHICS FOR MODERN CHRISTIANS
PART III - FREEDOM
DEUTERONOMY 6:4-9
GALATIANS 2:15-16, 5:13-15

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St . Augustine, one of the very important early church fathers and theologians, Bishop of Hippo, lived near the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth. Much of his writing is autobiographical, telling the story of how he - as a young man - struggled with the Gospel: how he tried the life of a scholar, then the life of a libertine; and how, finally, he returned to the church to become one of its leading thinkers. One of the most significant things he ever said in the area of the Christian ethic was this deceptively simple little sentence "Love, and then do what you please."

That statement reflects the Gospel as it has been presented by St. Paul. Writing to the early Christian Community in Galatia, Paul said, "...no man is ever justified by doing what the law demands ...you, my friends, were called to be freemen... For the whole law can be summed up in a single commandment; 'Love your neighbor as yourself'"

That sentiment emerged in the history of the church - in a rather revolutionary way - on the occasion we celebrate today, the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther rediscovered the essence of the New Testament faith; namely, that Christianity is not a set of church regulations and obligations: that the Christian life is not simply obeying the edicts of the Church. After years of personal turmoil and struggle Luther saw that Christianity begins with an awareness of God's love for man: that God's love is free - men can't earn it by doing anything, even those things the Church said they should do. Luther saw and said that the Gospel of Jesus Christ makes men free; free from the oppressive rules of the Church: free to make moral decisions on the basis of their own understanding of what God demands. And it is significant that one of the first things he did when he had been expelled from the Church of Rome was to take a wife who was, in fact, an ex-nun. Luther felt free to do something which the Church had said was wrong, because he saw that living a Christian life has very little to do with obeying a list of rules.

If we are going to think about the topic "Ethics for Modern Christians", sooner or later we must deal with the question of freedom. It's not an easy topic in and of itself. In addition, it is not an easy topic because of the general confusion and conflicting ideas about freedom in our culture today. One man's freedom is another man's prison. To one

The complexity of Hosea

segment of the population personal freedom keeps looking like moral anarchy. To another segment of the population every law, custom, tradition and rule looks like an oppressive denial of individual liberty.

So, it is not an easy topic, but discuss it we must: for freedom lies very close to th heart of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and needs to be built into any ethic which calls itself Christian.

Jean Paul Sartre, a French philosopher who is an atheist and an opponent of the Church has written widely about human freedom. Man is robbed of his freedom, Sartre suggests, if he allows anything or anyone to tell him who he is and what he should do. And in giving up his freedom man is less than man. People need to determine their own identity: to stand up and say "I am who I am": to decide autonomously what the good is and what my duty is and never to submit to the will of anyone else out of fear or superstition - whether that someone else be God, the Church, the state, or one's own father.

That kind of freedom is, in Sartre's philosophy,a kind of curse. We are, in his words, "condemned to freedom" : and in his writings and the works of other existentialist philosophers freedom is pretty grim: the free man pretty unhappy. But we need to claim it - if we are to be truly and fully men.

Now the irony of that is that Sartre intends to attack Christianity with it. And he has generally succeeded in making churchmen defensive and nervous. The fact is that he isn't attacking Christianity at all. The French atheist is, in fact, repeating a fundamental and basic assertion of the Gospel - namely that men are meant to be free: that true, God-given manhood has a very great deal to do with being free. What he is attacking - and what needs attacking is the way the Church has persisted in denying that: the way Christian men, in the name of Jesus Christ have all too willingly given up the freedom to be that makes them men.

Sartre is right when he suggests that freedom is a curse. It has always been easier to live by someone else's rules. Life is certainly simpler in a totalitarian state than in Democracy. If you take seriously your citizenship you are presonally aware that to step into a voting booth and make a responsible decision is not an easy thing to do: in fact, it is demanding. And life would be a whole lot simpler if there were one slate

presented and one candidate for each office and no need to make a choice - to take a stand. But in the anxiety of the voting booth is the very essence of being a man in a Democracy.

Refugees from East Germany find the going pretty rough when they experience the openness and lack of rigidity in West Germany. Some even go back to the security of a life in which every step is prescribed and no decisions of importance have to be made.

In terms of religion there has always been a fascination with legalistic, rigid structures. The Church itself has been guilty down through the years of squeezing theological truth into creeds and confessions and reducing Christian living to a narrow and rigid set of rules. That's always been tremendously appealing. It is less demanding, and therefore more comforting, for the Church - or the priest - or the minister - to dispense the truth rather than act as enabler as people discover the truth for themselves. It is more comforting for the Church to issue a list of "Thou shalt's and thou shalt not's" rather than insisting that men and women work their own way through the morass of moral complexity present in modern life.

That approach to theology (what is true) and ethics (what is right) is becoming extremely popular again in our day. The Campus Crusade for Christ offers a little booklet in which Christianity is reduced to "Four Spiritual Laws" which are repeated over and over again. Young people are buying it by the thousands. In fact, the "Campus Crusade" is the one form of institutional religion that is experiencing great growth today - with broad support from many of the traditional churches which seem to feel that anything that gets college people to say the word Jesus, other than profanely, must be good. I can't accept that. I keep running into a persistant thread of anti-legalism in the New Testament that just won't allow it. I keep discovering in the Gospel the word of freedom: the word that insists that God's children are called to be free.

Freedom is difficult. I'm not certain that it's accurate to say that we are "condemned" to it : but I do believe that it is demanding and therefore tempting to give up.

What usually happens to freedom - when it exists, is that it is either rejected by people who can't stand the demands, or abused by people who see it as the opportunity to do whatever they please. That was the problem to which Paul was addressing himself in his letter to the Galatians. "You are called to be free men", he told them, "only do not

turn your freedom into license." That's exactly what they had done. Free from the strictures of the law they felt that all the restraints were off. And things got pretty racy for a while. In Corinth, men were even getting drunk at Communion.

The same thing happened after the Reformation. " You are saved by the Grace of God, not by anything you do" Martin Luther said. And some people concluded that they were free to do anything. Splinter groupsemerged, one of which practiced a kind of communal marriage. But that's not freedom.

In our own culture we are able to see how fragile and vulnerable freedom is. We have a free press in this nation. We also have abuse of that freedom in terms of hard-core pornography. And many people seem to feel that freedom just isn't worth it. We have freedom of speech - and we have abuse of that freedom, which prompts some to want to restrict it. We have the right to privacy - we also have crime and conspiracy and collusion, which many would attack by wire tapping. On and on it goes: daily we see the pain and risk and hardship of being free. And always the lure of rigidity - the security of legalism is there.

Thus far we have thought about freedom in a broad general sense. The purpose has been to build a base for what we must now do, which is to look at specifically Christian freedom. And to do that we must begin at the beginning - with the Gospel itself.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is the Good News of God's love for us. Before any demands are made of us we are given something - God's love. In Jesus Christ, we believe that God cares about us personally: he accepts us just as we are:he doesn't ask us to become loveable - to obey the rules - to be good: he loves us as only a father can love his own children. Unfortunately, we're always trying to turn that around: to tie strings to God's love: to devise methods by which we can persuade him to love us. Unfortunately we have been taught to feel bad and guilty about ourselves: we have learned that the Gospel is not really Good News at all.

But it is Good! God loves us in spite of what we are. And to know that: to become aware suddenly that I am loved by my creator is to be brought low. It is to be profoundly grateful. It is to love him in return. It is to be made beautifully free in the sense that I now know I don't have to earn his love - I already have it. It is to want - to need - to be compelled - to answer that love. After all, that's what happens between people. When

one person extends love to another it is not often unanswered. In terms of our own parenthood we know that our behavioral expectations for our children had better be undergirded by accepting love - or else they will be ignored, or resentfully obeyed, which may be worse.

To know that God loves me is to be free. It is also to love him in return: to love him with heart, mind and soul. It is to see that God loves my neighbor, my friend, my enemy as much as he loves me. It is to see that the only way we have of answering God's love - is to love others - to act lovingly in every situation. That's the basis of Christian ethics. Free from the necessity of earning God's love: but compelled to love others. Thus Paul could say, "You, my friends, were called to be free men... but be servants to one another in love."

A German theologian puts it this way: "At crucial points in the Bible Jesus refuses to give us very definite and detailed rules of behavior. It would be far too simple to follow them... Instead of rules, Jesus unlocks the much more strenuous world of freedom to us and lets us decide for ourselves which way of obedience we think is demanded of us." (Helmut Thielicke, How To Believe Again, P. 46)

There is no law that can command us to love. There is no code of ethics that can define in every situation what is loving. There is only freedom and our own sense of God's love for us. That's what Augustine meant when he said, "Love, and then do what you please."

Let's look quickly at some examples:

- The law - or the traditional moral standard of a culture may say that divorce is wrong. The situationist may say that it is not a matter of right and wrong, but only of expedience. The Christian must make the painful decision of what is loving for everybody involved.
- The law may say that marital infidelity is wrong. The person who interprets freedom as a total absence of restrictions says "Why Not?" The Christian is compelled to ask, "What is loving to everyone involved?"
- The cultural norm may demand that a man give his life to his vocation, even if it's costing him his health. The Christian is compelled to decide what is loving and responsible. For some that may mean giving one's life, literally. For others, it may mean quitting and starting all over.

- The cultural imperative may demand that a successful man be involved in his community. And because he is attending meetings every night his wife and family may be hurting. The Christian has to decide: The Christian is free to say no - even to his church.

Does it sound rough - ambiguous - shaky - dangerous? It is - and the name for it is Christian freedom - responsible love lived out of gratitude for God's saving love.

Helmut Thielicke, who I quoted earlier, is very helpful when he suggests that the Christian Ethic is not a road map, but a compass. The compass points to the one commandment that is always valid: love God and the neighbor. "But I myself must find the way. That is my freedom. The way has rivers, mountains and other rough terrain which I must get around. At every crossroad I am faced with the question of which way will enable me to hold to the indicated direction... The compass leaves me free to pause..and even to be inventive and independent in the attempt to conquer the rough terrain in my life and to get around it...The whole countryside is mine; that is my freedom: but I am Christ's, and his love controls and leads me." (P. 150-151)

Part of it, I am coming to see, is that I cannot do this alone. Given my freedom by God I am inclined to abuse it - or turn it in for a kind of worn-out legalism. Part of it I am coming to see - and here I am confessing rather than preaching - is to allow the gracious God who has given me my freedom - to lead me.

I would conclude with that - with my conviction that God who makes us free - walks with us - and guides us - that he is literally with us in the moral complexity of our day: that he calls us to the exciting venture of life lived as free men and that he will not abandon us when we stumble and fall.

That was said very well in a great old hymn written in 1745

"Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah,
Pilgrim through this barren land.
I am weak, but thou art mighty:
Hold me with thy powerful hand."

You and I are free - we have been given a limitless gift of personal responsibility. It is a gift that demands our heart - our soul - all our might. AMEN

Guide us, father, as we make our way. Give us courage to embrace our freedom; give us love big enough to answer yours through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN